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ABSTRACT

Teacher-student writing conferences should provide students in composition classes with concentrated attention to their writing consonant with the teacher's in-class persona and instructional objectives. Some alternatives available to the instructor and the conferee include watching the teacher compose, sharing and revising journal entries, revising one another's writing, talk-writing (using a tape recorder), values clarification, analysis of a writing model, and one-to-two conferencing (two students meeting with the teacher). For college composition teachers, office hours provide time for conferencing, but secondary teachers have more difficulty scheduling time. Free periods, study halls, special class sessions, and time between classes can be utilized for five- to ten-minute conferences employing these strategies. Although it is assumed that writing conferences are helpful in improving student writing, there is little empirical evidence that this is true. Further research in this area is needed. (TJ)

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The Teacher-Student Writing Conference: New Approaches

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I would like to encourage two responses by my presentation today--exploration of alternative approaches to the teacher-student writing conference and empirical research into the efficacy of such conferences, traditional or otherwise. English teachers have rarely questioned the assumption that writing teachers meeting writing students, one-to-one, is an effective strategy for teaching composition. On the contrary, James Squire and Roger K. Applebee's (1968) national survey of high school English departments suggested that "perhaps the most successful practice in the teaching of composition has been the regular conference to discuss the problems and progress of the individual student" (p. 254).

Popular secondary methods texts encourage prospective English teachers to implement such conferences. Theodore Hipple (1973) says that this strategy allows students to clarify intentions and to effect immediate changes in their writing. J. N. Hook (1965) identifies conferencing as one of the "main kinds of activities" (p. 49) being tried out in experimental schools of the 1960's. Abraham Bernstein (1968) directs methods students to Janet Emig's (1960) early work on the subject. More recently, Floyd L. Bergman (1976) describes a variety of instructional activities involving writing conferences.

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Many college teachers of writing also consider the conference a crucial ancillary to whole-class instruction. The NCTE Guidelines for the Workload of the College English Teacher (1977) suggest that teachers should confer regularly with students in conferences of at least twenty minutes per student. Donald Ross (1973) goes even further, basing a composition course upon the premise "that the most effective way to help students (or anyone else) improve writing is by one person carefully reading another's manuscript, and then commenting at length to the author during an interview" (p. 1.). John Knapp (1976) lauds the conference as a time for on-the-spot feedback and revision of college freshman themes. Whether at the secondary or college level, those teachers recommending conferencing agree with Judith Kolman (1975) that such consultation allows the teacher not only to point out areas requiring improvement but also to note the strong points of a student's writing in a face-to-face situation.

In the past several years, there have been questions raised as to the efficacy of the "teacher-as-editor" writing conference. Such conferencing, says Mary Hiatt (1975), may only serve to further humiliate and distance a reluctant student writer. To make the conference an opportunity for the student and teacher to work together to improve student writing and attitude toward the writing process, composition instructors have suggested the following: small-group conferences which allow pupils not only to react to one another's manuscripts, but also

to plan revisions and future essays (Memering, 1973); non-directive conferences in which the teacher becomes thought generator, comment redirector, and (hopefully) trusted adult (Jacobs and Karliner, 1977); consultations using the social worker's interview as a model for sequencing activities into "engagement, problem explanation, problem identification, agreement to work on the problem together, task assignment, solution, and termination" (Arbur, 1977, p. 338).

I applaud these attempts to expand the options offered by the writing conference, but I also would like to suggest the need for a rationale upon which to base conference activities--a rationale which allows for greater flexibility for more teachers, provides for individual student needs, and is adaptable to a variety of situations. My rationale is that conferencing approaches should seek to provide students with concentrated attention to their writing, attention that is consonant with the teacher's in-class persona and instructional objectives. To this end, I have followed the advice of Anne Ruggles Gere (1978), by working from approaches which I have explored and written about elsewhere (1978) towards development of my rational for their application and expansion. These approaches, offered as examples of the sorts of alternatives available to the instructor and conferee, include:

1) Watching the teacher compose--a beginning-of-the-term conferencing technique for helping students who are apprehensive about writing. Because I am a pacer, brow furrower, paper crumpler, and curser, my frightened students realize that

their English teacher does not just sit down and produce one-draft, perfect prose.

2) Sharing and revising journal entries--a conferencing approach for alerting pupils to the possibilities of expressive writing This technique encourages both students and teacher to clarify differing points of view through revision of selected journal entries.

3) Revising one another's writing--a conferencing strategy for helping pupils to increase use of descriptive detail. This activity begins with a free-write, pen-to-paper, no stopping. After five minutes, teacher and pupil exchange drafts and suggest areas for possible expansion through the use of specific example and detail.

4) Talk-writing--a conferencing technique for raising student awareness of writer's voice and audience. Speaking into a tape recorder, students talk about subjects of personal importance. After playback, they attempt to identify the voice they wish to create and the audience they hope to reach. Then, while listening to the recording again, they revise, stopping and starting the machine, contrasting what's been written with what was said. This sequence, from speaking to listening to writing to listening to revision, grows from the research of Anthony Tovatt and Ebert L. Miller (1967) and Terry Radcliffe (1972).

5) Values clarification--adapting strategies developed by Robert C. Hawley, Sidney Simon, and David D. Britton (1973) for use as conferencing techniques to improve autobiographical

narration. These activities include rank ordering of personal accomplishments, a values shield (coat of arms) on which students illustrate significant life events, achievements, and aspirations, and "I learned..." statements helping students to verbalize what they gain from school, social and life experiences. The teacher's conference presence insures immediate feedback and encouragement while the student's activity-engendered commitment to writing about the self is at its highest.

6) Model analysis--a hands-on, problem-solving conference approach to teaching logical data organization. The teacher gives the conferee five or six randomly-ordered strips of paper, on each of which is one sentence from a short composition model. The student's problem is to arrange the strips in the order thought most logical. After completion of the puzzle, the student explains the arrangement of ideas. Finally, towards the end of the conference, the student receives the model in its original order and concludes the conference by attempting to imitate the author's data arrangement.

7) One-to-two conferencing--A conferencing technique for stimulating student-student dialogue leading to writing persuasive discourse. To participate in this double conference, students pick a conferencing partner and schedule a meeting with the teacher. At the start of the consultation, the teacher suggests a topic of local controversy and a "triologue" commences--the two students and the teacher offering views

on the topic. Gradually, the teacher drops out of the discussion, leaving the students to develop a dialogue in which they either reinforce one another's views or debate the topic. At a logical break in the conversation, the teacher asks each student to use the ideas broached in the dialogue to begin a paper that takes a stand on the discussed topic. In my experience with this method, the expected results, improved propositional statement and development, have been supplemented by practice in listening skills.

How can we teachers of writing find the time to implement these and whatever other conferencing activities we find that fall under the rationale of concentrated attention and instructional consistency? This is not a difficult question to answer for many teachers of college composition. We can have office hours and reasonably expect our students to show up. Those of us who are or who have been secondary school teachers know that office hours are usually an unavailable option. There is no easy solution to this dilemma. Squire and Applebee remark that conferences "are worth instituting even if they must be handled at the expense of other activities during regularly scheduled class meetings; they work best, however, when effected through changes in the scheduling of the traditional school day" (p. 254). Barring such rare, happy occurrences, one might do well to work from Charles R. Duke's (1975) valuable reminder that a conference need not

be a formal, sit-down affair. If one concentrates "only on the major problem of the moment" (p. 46), then conference time can be greatly reduced and conferences can be held anytime, anyplace. This means free periods, study halls (in schools where they still exist), special class sessions, and between classes. Five or ten minutes can suffice to adapt the kinds of strategies I've suggested earlier.

Now that I have spent the better part of this talk encouraging writing teachers to develop and try out a variety of conferencing strategies, I would like to anticipate a question. What empirical evidence is there that supports the efficacy of conferencing, traditional or otherwise, for improving student writing and attitude toward the writing process? My answer is that there is very little.

There is a limited body of research on conferencing, but it doesn't allow for any broad statements about such interviews' value. There are four reasons I can discern for these research studies' inability to clarify the effect of conferencing. First, they may confound the effect of conferencing with other methods (for example, we have evidence that a program of work in an independent learning center, including conferencing, can help certain college freshmen perform better in their writing classes [Gates, 1977], but we don't know the role of the conference in the mix of activities that makes up the learning center experience). Second, such studies may suggest unrealistic experimental conferencing situations. Judith Budz and Terry

Grabar (1976) report on a technique in which some students received more than weekly conferences of fifteen to sixty minutes each. If I had even weekly conferences of fifteen to sixty minutes, I could never go home. Third, flaws in experimental design weaken conclusions from an otherwise insightful study such as Myrna Smith and Barbara Bretcko's (1974). Here, students at a New Jersey community college received two class periods and one conference period per week. However, a control group received three class periods a week. The study's findings of no difference between treatment groups may be due to a Type II error (accepting a null hypothesis of no difference, when it should have been the rejected alternative) because of failure to make the conferencing variable truly independent. Rather, what is being examined is the "meta-variable," conferences plus fewer classes. Fourth, failure to use writing to measure writing improvement weakens Mildred Fritts' (1976) study which used the McGraw-Hill Basic Skills System to measure conferees' writing improvement. As so often in the past, a writing experiment is really measuring reading skills.

At Michigan Tech, we are currently trying to utilize appropriate research design to examine the results of conferencing. In so doing, we hope to isolate the effect of such interviews in a realistic context. We are using student writing and the Daly and Miller (1975) writing apprehension instrument (a device for measuring fear of writing) to see whether conferencing is accomplishing what it claims--and for whom.

We are now in the data analysis phase of our first stage--examining for short-term effects of conferencing. Stages are planned for sequentially increased conference frequency and time per conference as well as varied conferencing strategies and student populations. We hope our work and that of our colleagues will provide added insight into a familiar, highly-valued, part of composition instruction. I would be interested in hearing from others working in the same or cognate areas and would hope that researchers "between projects" consider conferencing as an area of assumptions in need of testing.

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